

P 262138Z MAY 09
FM AMEMBASSY ASUNCION
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7866
INFO MERCOSUR COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
FBI WASHDC PRIORITY
DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHDC PRIORITY
HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
USSOCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASUNCION 000344

FOR DS/ITA, DS/IP, DS/ATA, S/CT AND WHA/BSC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/21/2029
TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PA](#)
SUBJECT: THREATS AND FAKE BOMBS IN ASUNCION

REF: A. ASUNCION 261
[1](#)B. ASUNCION 284
[1](#)C. ASUNCION 308

Classified By: DCM Michael J. Fitzpatrick. Reasons: 1.4 (B&D)

[1](#)1. (U) SUMMARY: There have been 58 bomb threats in greater Asuncion since April 29, with one device actually detonating and four mock explosive devices found. This is likely part of a harassment campaign against the Government of Paraguay. The presence of multiple devices specifically designed to look like bombs, as well as numerous phoned-in bomb threats, demonstrate the deliberate nature of the campaign, further aggravated by copycat prank calls. The flood of threats and mock devices has strained the capabilities of Paraguayan law enforcement and created tension in Asuncion. The U.S. government and U.S. Embassy have provided support throughout the situation and are currently providing the Paraguayan National Police with analytical assistance. With no credible claims of responsibility; conspiracy theories have proliferated. The Lugo government, in the absence of any further explosions, appears to be weathering the storm. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (U) A DELIBERATE HARASSMENT CAMPAIGN: The recent wave of bomb threats and incidents quite literally began with a bang when a small improvised explosive device (IED) detonated at the Supreme Court building on the morning of Wednesday, April [1](#)29. The device was found by a cleaning woman in the basement women's restroom. She carried the device to police on duty in the building who placed the device in an outside courtyard where it exploded minutes later. There were no injuries. The device was described as a watch attached by wires to several tubes. The Paraguayan Police Special Forces (FOPE) requested the assistance of the Regional Security Office (RSO) to determine the type of explosives used. The RSO responded with an Embassy Itemiser and determined the device contained RDX and nitro. Paraguayan People's Army (EPP) propaganda was reportedly found elsewhere in the downtown area the same day, threatening corrupt judges and prosecutors, but did not specifically mention the bombing. Jailed EPP leader Carmen Villalba claimed responsibility for the attack later in the day in a media interview, but EPP responsibility could not be confirmed. There were no other claims of responsibility for the bombing (Ref A).

[1](#)3. (U) The second major incident took place at approximately 0800 on the morning of Tuesday, May 5. A device was found in front of Saba Commercial, the downtown office complex of prominent local businessman Gustavo Saba. (NOTE: Saba owns numerous companies in Paraguay and represents various multi-national corporations including Marlboro, British-American Tobacco, Kraft and Miller Brewing. END NOTE)
FOPE explosive ordinance disposal (EOD) technicians responded to the scene and the Regional Security Office was again asked to assist. The RSO responded to the scene with U.S. Special Operations (SOCFWD) explosives experts and visiting FBI personnel. The RSO met with the Minister of Interior Rafael Filizzola and National Police Commandant Viviano Machado, who asked for assistance in moving the

device. After discussion it was determined neither Embassy nor FOPE personnel had the necessary equipment to move the device (and in the U.S. case, the desire). FOPE EOD technicians then disrupted the device using a water cannon (provided by DS/ATA in 2008). The device did not explode and was harmlessly deactivated. Ensuing analysis by SOCFWD and FOPE personnel using the Embassy Itemiser determined the device contained no explosives, but was well made and designed to look like an explosive device. May 5 saw the beginning of the wave of phoned-in bomb threats, with threats received at the government-run water utility and a police identification center. In each situation the building was evacuated and swept for explosives by FOPE EOD without incident.

14. (U) At approximately 1030 on the morning of Wednesday, May 6, downtown Asuncion saw a particularly disturbing incident with a device found in the women's restroom of a gasoline station. The station had received 7,000 liters of fuel early that morning. After evacuating the surrounding area, FOPE EOD technicians disrupted the device without incident. The Regional Security Office provided technical assistance in determining if explosives were present. Traces of explosives were found on the device, but it is likely the evidence was contaminated by the water cannon used to disrupt the device. The device was clearly designed to look like an IED, with wires connecting a clock and batteries wrapped around two red tubes. Bomb threats were called in on May 6 to a court building and grade school as well.

15. (U) Another device was found on the morning of May 7, at a health center. The device, a doll with the Spanish word for bomb written on its head and chest as well as 'TNT' on its stomach, was disrupted by FOPE EOD without incident. In this case, as with the previous two, the device was clearly intended to look like an IED, with red wires connecting the head of the doll to the arms and legs. Almost one week later, two other devices were found and disrupted on 12 May and 18 May. The devices were found at the Columbia University and a private residence in Luque, a suburb of Asuncion. The devices were disrupted without incident by FOPE EOD. Further analysis, by FOPE EOD, of the two devices determined they did not have explosives present but were likely fabricated by the same person. The materials used in constructing the two devices, batteries and packing tape, were identical and the manner of construction similar.

16. (U) PARAGUAYAN GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: The initial response by the Government of Paraguay was vocal and defiant. Interior Minister Rafael Filizzola made a public statement following the Supreme Court bombing on April 29, calling for calm and stating that law enforcement had the situation under control. The fake device incident at a downtown gas station the following day prompted President Fernando Lugo to go on national television and declare that a 'dirty war' was being waged against the people of Paraguay. However, as the number of threats has increased without another device detonating, senior Paraguayan officials have let law enforcement take the lead in addressing the situation. The Paraguayan National Police have made several arrests in the case, but all suspects have been freed following investigation or found to be making copycat bomb threats. Security at government and public utility buildings has been stepped up with public access restricted and searches of vehicles and personnel at entrances. The Paraguayan National Police and FOPE continue to evacuate and search buildings when they receive a threat. Repeated searches of large buildings, such as the evacuation and search of an 300-bed municipal hospital on May 21, have strained FOPE's capabilities and underscored a need for the EOD unit to expand.

17. (C) U.S. ASSISTANCE: Paraguayan authorities have consistently asked for and received technical assistance and support from the United States throughout this situation. The RSO, together with visiting FBI personnel and resident U.S. military explosives experts, provided advice and analysis on the first three devices. Currently the Regional Security Office and FBI are working with Paraguayan criminal

investigators to send evidence from the various scenes to the FBI forensic lab in Quantico for in-depth analysis. U.S. Embassy analysts are also supporting the Paraguayan National Police investigation with link analysis on cell phone data gained from the various calls in threats and tips provided by Paraguayan citizens. A visiting U.S. government EOD expert provided training to FOPE EOD technicians as well as an assessment of their capabilities. The FOPE are assessed to be an effective and professional force with the capability to handle most EOD situations. While Paraguayan authorities have repeatedly asked for high-tech EOD tools, such as robots, the U.S. expert stated the FOPE needed to expand its team by training additional personnel in search techniques, instead of investing in advanced technology. The U.S. expert also provided prioritized recommendations for FOPE training and equipment needs. The Embassy is engaged in coordinating further training for FOPE EOD personnel and possibly additional equipment.

¶8. (SBU) PATTERNS AMONG THE THREATS: As the number of bomb threats increased, several interesting patterns have emerged. The presence of multiple fake explosive devices suggests a deliberate campaign of harassment against the Paraguayan government and law enforcement. The distribution of bomb threats varies according to days of the week, with Saturdays free of bomb threats and Monday to Friday averaging two to three. May 11 and May 12 saw a large surge in the number of threats, coinciding with campesino and anti-government demonstrations in downtown Asuncion, with a total of 16 threats and one fake device on those two days. The locations have also varied greatly over the course of the last three weeks with a wide range of businesses, schools, government buildings, private homes, and even a cemetery receiving threats. Government buildings have been consistent targets, with the Supreme Court building as the favorite receiving four threats and one actual bomb. However, the number of threats to schools and small businesses, such as the Don Vito Empanada Restaurant, suggest at least some of the bomb threats are copycats. One student confessed to calling in a bomb threat to his university following his arrest.

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT: Analysis by both Paraguayan and U.S. explosives experts indicates the fake devices are well constructed and capable of detonating if connected to explosives. Whoever is constructing the devices is electing not to cause explosions and casualties. It seems unlikely given the extensive nature of the Paraguayan black market, and the successful first device, that they are unable to obtain the relatively small quantities of explosives necessary to stock the fake devices found to date.

¶10. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: As the number of threats climbs with no credible claims of responsibility, conspiracy theories have proliferated. The original theory of the Paraguayan People's Army (EPP) involvement in the threats and fake devices has given way to suspicion of multiple actors working, perhaps independently, to destabilize the Lugo government. Many suspect former coup-plotter retired General Lino Oviedo of seeking to weaken confidence in Lugo's administration. Others see the Colorado Party focused on creating a crisis atmosphere and some even suggest the unlikely theory Lugo himself is attempting to distract attention from his domestic problems. Calls have increased for the military to take to the streets to ensure order and security given the continuing threats and the absence of any substantive progress in the investigation. However up to this point it is business as usual, with both the military and police apparently loyal to civilian authority. The Lugo government, in the absence of any further explosions, appears to be weathering the storm.

Please visit us at <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/asuncion>

AYALDE